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## The Stanford Prison Experiment

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# The Stanford Prison Experiment

## **Abstract**

This is a film review of *The Stanford Prison Experiment* (2015), directed by Kyle Patrick Alvarez.

## **Author Notes**

Rubina (Ruby) Ramji is an Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at Cape Breton University. After serving as a Chair of the Religion, Film and Visual Culture Group for the American Academy of Religion and then on the steering committee, Rubina continues to serve on the Executive Committee for the Canadian Society for the Study of Religion as President and is the Film Editor of the *Journal of Religion and Film*. Her research activities focus on the areas of religion, media and identity, religion in Canada, and religion and immigration



*The Stanford Prison Experiment*  
(2015)  
Directed by Kyle Patrick Alvarez

Based on the actual events that took place at Stanford University in 1971, *The Stanford Prison Experiment* portrays the psychological experiment undertaken by Dr. Philip Zimbardo. Although many people may be aware of the experiment conducted by Zimbardo, this film highlights how "human behavior is affected by roles, rules, symbols and uniforms rather than personality and behavior traits." This experiment, considered infamous, examines structures of authority and how authority can be abused.

Zimbardo conducted an experiment to examine how people behaved in prison systems; he hired students to play the role of guard or prisoner, and the decision of who would be guard or prisoner was decided by the flip of a coin. This one, tiny arbitrary decision became pivotal in understanding how human beings behave when placed in positions of authority. It did not seem

to matter what type of personality the students portrayed at the beginning of the experiment; by the end of the first day, the guards had become abusive and the prisoners eventually were broken.

Although the experiment was to have lasted two weeks, by the sixth day the guards had become so abusive and degrading that Zimbardo ended the experiment early. When asked how the students felt after the experiment had concluded, it was clear that they had all been affected by it in negative ways. Only one student who played a guard said he felt no regrets or guilt for the way he acted. In essence, he was behaving the way any human would in that position.

*The Stanford Prison Experiment* wants us to believe that it's our nature to become abusive when placed in positions of authority. If this is true, it perhaps explains why we hear about instances of clergy abusing their positions of power, of police shooting unarmed civilians, and of politicians becoming dictators.